



Dr. Ellen Hooker still “hooked” on regulatory veterinary medicine after 27 years

Release Date: February 6, 2013

Contact: Raechelle Cline, 608-224-5005

Jim Dick, Communications Director, 608-224-5020

MADISON – Jeff, a small white toy dog with long black ears stuffed with fluff, was Dr. Ellen Hooker’s first veterinary patient. As a child, she made homemade syringes to give Jeff his “shots.” Her love of veterinary work continues today, though her patients have become much more responsive to her treatments.

“I wanted to be a veterinarian since I was just a little girl. My stuffed animals were the recipients of many bandages, slings, and splints,” Hooker says of her initial foray into veterinary medicine, an interest that has endured for more than 27 years.

Hooker started her career as a federal veterinary medical officer in 1985 and now serves as a field veterinarian in the Division of Animal Health at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP), a position she has held since 1993.

“It’s a wonderful field. Regulatory veterinary medicine is different from private practice and we aren’t always well received. A big part of my job is to help people understand why I’m there and why it’s important to them and the animal community,” Hooker says. “My best moments are when a producer, for example, has to do something they don’t want to do, like quarantine, but they ultimately realize it wasn’t so bad.”

Hooker’s job has changed a bit over the years, but she continues to adapt and finds new challenges.

“We used to spend a lot more time on farms testing animals, doing herd disease surveillance and those types of activities, but now we are more geared toward acting as an information source for private veterinarians and serving as a liaison,” she says, adding that she has “much less manure on her boots these days.”

Globally, the number of infectious agents known to be pathogenic to humans has exceeded 1,400 and about 60 percent of them are zoonotic, or transmitted to humans from animals, according to the European Academies of Science Advisory Council. Hooker sees this as a very important reason for public health veterinarians like herself to be at the forefront of looking for disease and keeping people aware of what’s happening.

“As a field veterinarian, I tend to have a more one-on-one rapport with private practice veterinarians in my area, so they know they can call me anytime with questions that they may face,” she says.

Disease investigation, which has a strong public health component, is something that interested Hooker in veterinary school at the University of Minnesota. While there, she served as a researcher for nine months studying enzootic bovine leukosis, a contagious disease among cattle that causes a fatal malignant cancer and can be responsible for major economic losses.



After more than 27 years, Dr. Ellen Hooker is still hooked on regulatory veterinary medicine.

Originally, researchers thought that the viral disease was spread primarily via biting flies, but Hooker's research revealed that humans also caused transmission by reusing blood-contaminated needles, surgical equipment or gloves used for rectal examinations.

“What I liked most about this experience is that it was the perfect combination of research, cattle work and publishing papers about the findings,” Hooker says.

Hooker was able to put her disease investigation skills to work again in 2003 when monkeypox was discovered in Wisconsin and eventually turned out to be the first outbreak of the disease in the Western Hemisphere, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Monkeypox is similar to smallpox but less infectious and occurs primarily in the rain forests of Central and West Africa, which made the discovery in Wisconsin quite unusual. Ultimately, the disease was traced back to prairie dogs sold as pets from a pet shop in Milwaukee that came from a dealer in Illinois. As a result, prairie dogs can no longer be kept as private pets in this state and can only be found in Wisconsin zoos, which Hooker believes is the best outcome.

As she continues her career at DATCP, Hooker sees herself continuing as an educator, helping to link the agriculture and non-agriculture communities by serving as a resource on animal disease, animal well-being and other important topics.

Fortunately for us, it all started with Jeff, a small white toy dog with long black ears stuffed with fluff who didn't mind a few “shots”.

For more information about what DATCP does, visit datcp.wi.gov. You can also connect with us on Twitter at twitter.com/widatcp or Facebook at facebook.com/widatcp.

###